

JUSTHUMAN

Gone With Generator Smoke Fumes!

They had gathered to worship their God all right, all of them women, some of them with children. But a tragic combination of factors—the absence of power supply from PHCN and the running of a petrol generator inside a church building with shuttered windows—led to untoward consequences for the participants. **SUNDAY ORISAKWE** reports.



It was intended to be an all-women night vigil at Bible Faith Church International, Ogunsoju Estate along Abeokuta Express Road, Lagos. And women, both old and young, had gathered in their tens to spend a quiet time with the Lord of Host, in the church that Friday night. But by the time it ended the following morning, tragic had struck: in the morning when the church door was opened, all the women and an 11-year-old boy that took part in the vigil all lay in their own vomits. While some of them were dead, others, fortunately, were only unconscious, all of them choked by smoke from a generator left inside the church building overnight while all the windows were shut.

Dickson Onuka an 11-year-old boy survived the ordeal and is alive to tell what happened inside the church that night. "When we came for the vigil, the assistant pastor's wife asked for the generator to be put on," he narrated. "I was asked to go and call the person that would put it on. I did that. At this time the generator was inside the church and we wanted to open all the windows but Pastor Martins's wife said we should not open them because of mosquitos and for security reasons. We agreed with her because her husband is one of the pastors. She was the person that closed the main



Died: Baby Clarence Ofojebe

PHOTO: PRECIOUS OUT

door.

"We started the vigil, but as the vigil continued, people started getting weak and falling down because of the carbon dioxide that we were inhaling. There was a particular woman with a child, she was trying to stand up, but each time she tried, she would fall with her baby. She tried using all the strength left in her to stand but she couldn't; each time she would fall back on the floor with her baby. I tried to stand up to go and open the door, but hard as as I tried, I could not stand. I just lay on the ground, with my eyes closed, by now too heavy for me to open. But I was still a little bit conscious."

As at 7.30 a.m. the Saturday morning, which was an environmental day, according to *The Guardian* investigation, Pastor Martins called his wife on phone but it was not picked. He called the other pastor to go to the church and find out why the wife was not answering her calls. Meanwhile the person that helped put on the generator came to the church, knocked on the door, peeped from under the door and saw people lying on the floor. Thinking that they were still sleeping, he turned to go away. But just then, one of the pastors came around with the key, which they used to open the church door.

It was learnt that when the plant operator opened the door, which hadn't been locked in the first instance, he saw everybody inside the church lying on their vomits. There was also blood everywhere. Shocked, he raised an alarm and people came and took the victims to the Ikeja Medical Centre.

A man who identified himself simply as Mr. Ofojebe described the loss of his eight-month old son in the tragedy, as a very sad experience that would take him a very long time to forget, if he will ever forget. He is, however, grateful to God that his wife survived.

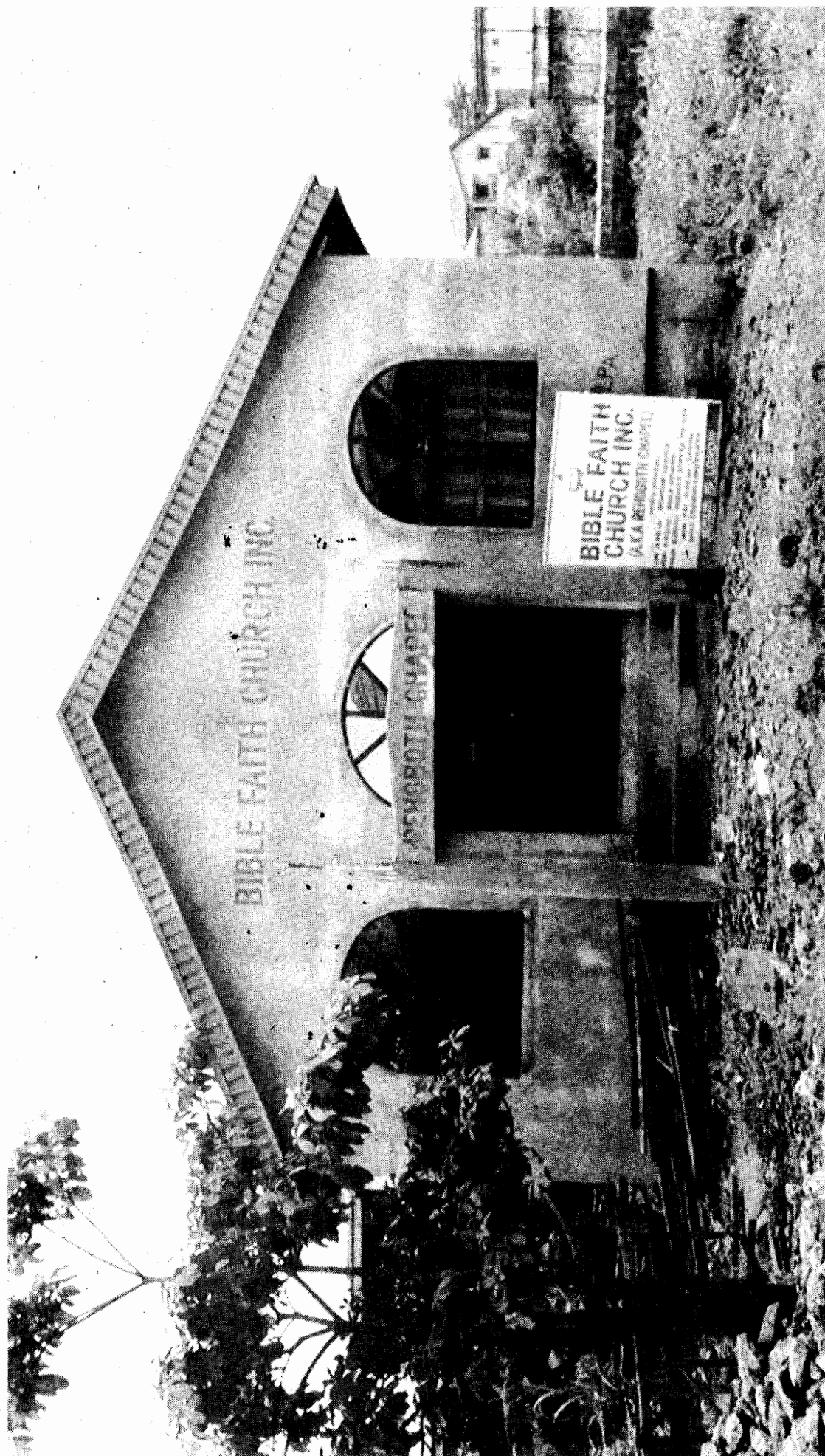
Narrating how his family became a victim of the tragedy, he told of his wife went for the Friday night vigil at their church.

"She left that night with our eight-month old baby. Before they left that night, the boy was so happy when I came back from work. We played until the mother took him to the vigil. After they left, I went to sleep. Then around 4 a.m., I woke up because I thought some one was knocking on the door but when I opened the door, I didn't see anybody. I went back to bed, woke up later and started doing environmental clean up. So, it was while I was doing the clean up that, somebody ran to our house to inform us that something had happened to the women that went to night vigil.

"When I ran to the church, I did not see my son, but I saw my wife and already there was a car there. So we rushed my wife and others to the hospital.

"It was at the hospital that I met my little son dead. My wife was breathing but she was uncon-

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The ill-fated church

scious and one other woman was dead. When my wife became conscious, I asked her what happened and she said the assistant pastor's wife insisted that there will be enough air entering the church. He also called for constant public health education so that people could understand the danger inherent

the generator should be inside the church so that thieves would not steal it. She said they argued with her but she insisted that it must be inside." Further investigation revealed that the pastor's wife had insisted that the generator should be inside and did not survive. She died at the hospital and was reportedly carrying a three-month pregnancy.

Mr. Ofojebe's neighbour's wife, Mrs. Doris Jackson who went with Mrs Ofojebe to the night vigil also died in the hospital a few days later, leaving three children behind.

The husband Mr. Sunday Jackson told The Guardian that he was still too stunned to say anything.

A source told *The Guardian* that during the clapping and dancing at the vigil, it was the assistant pastor's wife who fell down first. Others who were already weak but were still managing to dance thought she was under the influence of the spirit and for this reason did not bother to assist her.

But the family of Doris wondered why the said church where the vigil took place was constructed without having ventilation space where air could come into the church even if the doors and window were closed.

"In this present generation, how could somebody construct a church without thinking of ventilation. How are we sure that this church got house approval from Lagos State, works and Housing ministry? No government would approve for you to build a public place without proper ventilation system. But since our sister is dead, we leave everything in the hands of God," lamented one of Doris sisters.

For his part, Mr. Ofojebe advised that church buildings should be constructed in such a way that

in the wrong use of certain modern appliances otherwise meant to enhance the quality of life. He noted that having once read in the papers that generator smoke choked some people to death, he would have insisted that the generator be kept outside if he was at the vigil service.

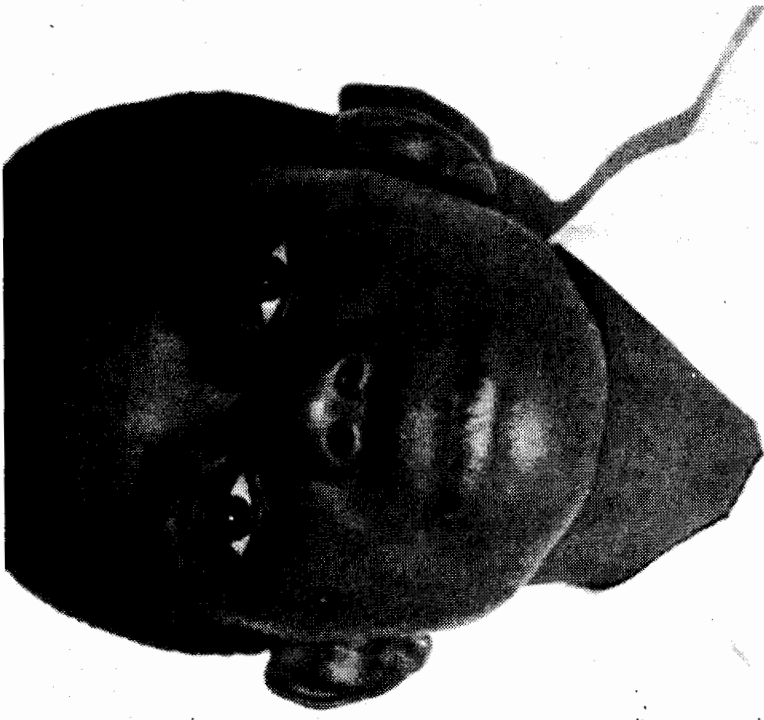
"Even God said in the Bible that his people perish because of lack of knowledge. These things happen because of lack of knowledge, otherwise I wouldn't know why the assistant Pastor's wife would insist that the generator must be inside with the whole windows closed," he lamented.

"The issue of establishing a church is not only to praise God, and collect offering. It's about living; people will be alive before they worship God. So, a pastor's wife should be able to educate other women in the church. And if she does not know, how can she lead other people? And in such night vigils, even if the vigil were to be for only women, one or two men should be with the women in case of unfortunate situations like the one that has just happened. Am sure that if a man was among them, he could have had enough strength to open the church door for air to come into the church."

But, Mr. Femi Alalade who lives close to the church said it was pointless apportioning blame, rather all must pray for the repose of the souls of those who lost their lives in the unfortunate incident and for God to ensure that such a thing never happened again.

Admitting that the incident was "a great mistake that has caused great pains in the hearts of the victims' families," he stressed that "we owe it a duty to console them not to blame any one or group for the tragedy."

We started the vigil, but as the vigil continued, people started getting weak and falling down because of the carbondioxide that we were inhaling. There was a particular woman with a child, she was trying to stand up, but each time she tried, she would fall with her baby. She tried using all the strength left in her to stand but she could'nt; each time she would fall back on the floor with her baby. I tried to stand up to go and open the door, but hard as as I tried, I could not stand. I just lay on the ground, with my eyes closed, by now too heavy for me to open. But I was still a little bit conscious.



Survived: Dickson Nnoka

PHOTOS: PRECIOUS OTU